WORKERS HAMMER 4

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Apathy, despair, right-wing reaction

Stefan Rousseau/Getty; Carl Court/Getty

How to fight back

Sir Keir Starmer's premiership is a disaster. The Labour government is battered by one scandal after another—usually of its own making—and confronted with a crumbling economy it has no clue how to fix. Labour's economic strategy, if we can call it that, consists of tinkering with building regulations and red tape while hoping that projecting an image of "grown-ups in the room" will bring back economic growth. Fat chance! Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves have no vision or ideas of their own, lack any talent at pretending otherwise and live on wishful thinking and borrowed time.

Buffeted by the urgent needs of the country, the demands of big capitalists and a growing right wing, Labour is teetering on its tightrope. The last budget gave a little bit to big businesses, a little bit to workers and public services—too little to make any difference, but just enough to anger everyone. The result is that Starmer has set the record for the biggest post-election fall in approval rates of any prime minister in the modern era.

The terrain could not be better for Reform UK and the forces of right-wing reaction. The election of Trump in the US has marked a profound shift and a definite end to the liberal era. The last liberal-centrist governments are now falling one after the other, from Trudeau in Canada to Scholz in Germany. Personifying the confidence of the right, Elon Musk has made Starmer's downfall his personal goal, using any club he can find to beat him—even hitting Farage in the process for not being right-wing enough.

But beyond the international political wind, all the weaknesses of Labour are paving the way for Reform. Immigration has reached an all-time high, Labour's budget has succeeded in angering farmers and small business owners, and the government is pursuing a net zero policy which is destroying what is left of industry. The Vauxhall car plant in Luton has announced its closure because of EV quotas, putting 1,100 workers on the scrap heap. This adds to other closures, like the Grangemouth Refinery in Scotland, and the mass layoffs at the Port Talbot steelworks in Wales. All of this and more is pushing millions into the arms of the right wing.

But even more significant in the rise of the right is the fact that ***all*** the trade union leaders are supporting this weak and hated government. Those who are supposed to represent the working class called to vote for Starmer in the last election. RMT general secretary Mick Lynch, who virulently denounced leftists who refused to back Starmer, is now retiring after having channelled discontent into Labour. The TUC applauded the budget, praising Reeves for delivering "an economy that works for working people" (tuc.org.uk, 31 October 2024).

If you are a member of Unison, you are being bombarded by propaganda celebrating the "new deal for workers"—this damp squib which barely changes anything. NEU leaders have hailed Reeves's pay rise of 5.5 per cent while schools remain in ruins. Even oh-so-militant Unite leader Sharon Graham welcomed the budget. While Graham and other trade union leaders did criticise Labour, they remain loyal to this anti-worker

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Gaza ceasefire

Palestine needs a real victory

For more than a year, Palestinians heroically resisted Israel's genocidal onslaught. As the ceasefire went into effect on 19 January, Gazans poured into the streets in defiance and elation. The entire might of the Israeli armed forces could not crush their resolve, and Hamas has not been defeated. This in and of itself constitutes an undeniable success.

While the sense of triumph and relief is fully understandable, it should not stand in the way of a sober evaluation of the overall outcome of the war. Amidst the legitimate celebrations, we also find many deluded analyses presenting the war as an unmitigated disaster for Israel and a triumph for Palestine. David Hearst, editor-in-chief of *Middle East Eye*, writes that "after 15 months of brutality, Israel has failed on every front". The problem with such evaluations is not only that they are wrong, exaggerating the success of the resistance and sweeping setbacks under the rug, but that they are profoundly disorienting.

It is necessary to unconditionally stand with the Palestinian resistance in its struggle against the Zionist state. That said, supporting Palestinian liberation does not mean blindly cheerleading. It is clear to everyone that the plight of the Palestinians, those in Gaza most of all, is far from over. Indeed, on 26 January President Trump threatened to "clean out" Gaza. It is thus essential to take this reprieve, however short it may be, to draw lessons and prepare for the next phase of the conflict so that it can result in a real and decisive victory over Zionism.

A sober balance sheet

Many have evaluated the outcome of the last 15 months of war by looking at Israel's stated aim of eliminating Hamas. Clearly Israel failed on this front. However, this offers only a partial picture. To have a more complete appreciation, we must look at the overall strategic situation in the region.

Beyond the initial shock that 7 October dealt Israeli society, the violence and duration of the conflict were fuelled by a changing balance of forces in West Asia. For years, the Axis of Resistance, which includes Iran, Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas and Syria (before Assad's fall), had been expanding its military capabilities. In the context of the relative decline of US global power, this had explosive implications. For many in Israel's ruling circles, it was more important to reassert regional dominance than to permanently destroy Hamas.

So, while the pressure from the incoming Trump administration was important in forcing Netanyahu to commit to the ceasefire proposal, negotiated months ago, the other key factor was the sentiment among Israel's political leadership that it had dealt decisive blows to the Axis of Resistance. To evaluate the reality of this, we must look at where the conflict leaves the main members of this alliance.

Hamas is still standing, and for the moment

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PARTISAN DEFENCE COMMITTEE

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL!

As Starmer is pushing anti-working-class policies and right-wing reactionaries like Farage are gaining ground, the attacks on minorities, political activists and on all our rights continue unabated. To rebuild its strength for the battles ahead, the workers movement must unite in action to defend those being targeted. To build such united-front defence is the purpose of the PDC.

A cause that could galvanise every trade unionist in the country is defence of Lucy Letby. Her conviction is not only a direct attack on the health unions, making their members responsible for the failures of a chronically understaffed and underfunded NHS, but also a dire warning to all workers to shut up and put up. This is why we seek to advance the struggle to free Letby.

For the last 15 months, both Labour and the Tories have thrown their full support behind Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people. To intimidate anyone challenging Israel's right to massacre the Palestinians, the government has used sinister anti-terror legislation to arrest activists and journalists. Outrageously, at the most recent Palestine protest in London, cops not only tried to prevent the march from happening but then brutally arrested over 70 people, including prominent leaders of the Stop the War coalition who had rallied in defiance of the ban. The workers movement must mobilise in defence of the arrestees, upholding the democratic right to protest for all who oppose the foreign policies of British imperialism.

The workers movement cannot fight for its own interests without fighting for the most oppressed and vulnerable layers in society. Unions should be at the forefront of defending the ten black youths in Manchester, outrageously jailed for sending private texts venting their grief and anger after one of their friends was murdered. Since our statement in December (see below), seven of the boys had their appeal hearings, which reversed the conviction of one of the youths. Two had their sentences reduced and four remain imprisoned with their convictions upheld.

Forging bonds of international class solidarity is key to rebuilding the unions. The PDC is joining in the defence of Anasse Kazib, a leader of the Trotskyist organisation Révolution Permanente and trade unionist in France facing seven years in jail for tweeting in support of the Palestinians.

We also launched an international campaign in October in defence of anti-austerity protesters in Nigeria facing the death penalty on trumped-up treason charges. The protesters have since been released with draconian bail conditions, but the threat of death continues to hang over their heads. The struggles of the Nigerian people for their liberation from imperialist domination are intimately linked to working-class struggle here because we face the same enemy.

As these statements make clear, there is a crying need for united-front defence in the tough times ahead. Join us in these campaigns including by making donations.

Defend Anasse Kazib against French state repression

We print below the translation of a 15 January statement by the legal and social defence organisation associated with the ICL's French section.

Révolution Permanente

Révolution Permanente's Anasse Kazib

The Comité de Défense sociale (CDDS), together with the Ligue trotskyste de France, joins in Révolution Permanente's call for a united front in response to the latest attack by the state targeting Anasse Kazib, their main spokesman and a trade union activist with SUD-Rail. Like hundreds of other activists in this country, he is being prosecuted for "glorification of terrorism" because of his support for the Palestinian cause.

This is a grotesque and sinister accusation. Anasse's trial is set for 18 June. He faces up to seven years' imprisonment, a fine of thousands of euros and being ineligible for public office. As Anasse himself stated in an 8 January press release: "By persecuting me, the state is testing the limits of what it can do in the repressive sphere to send us a message."

Precisely. Faced with the escalation of "anti-terror" repression, i.e. repression of Muslims and pro-Palestinians, and the rise of the far right, it is vital for the workers movement to defend all those targeted by the witch hunt, whatever their political or religious views. If the state can do this to an activist as nationally known as Anasse, it will have carte blanche to imprison thousands of trade unionists and youth from immigrant and minority neighbourhoods! ***We must close ranks in defence of Anasse Kazib and all the pro-Palestine activists facing charges!***

The CDDS calls on trade union activists and all parties and organisations of the left, as well as anti-racist collectives, to coordinate our efforts to present a united defence front. ***Drop the charges! Free all imprisoned pro-Palestine activists now! Hands off Anasse Kazib!***

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Protest racist British state: Free the Manchester 10!

The following PDC statement was issued on 11 December 2024.

Ten black youth were thrown in prison in 2022 because of a group chat on Telegram. The Manchester 10 exchanged messages following the murder of their friend in November 2020. The boys, seven of whom were aged 17 at the time of the murder, were using the group chat to vent their shock, grief and anger at the sudden, violent loss of their friend. But to the racist British state, their text messages and music were evidence of "gang" activity, and conspiracy charges were used to railroad them to prison. Four were charged with conspiracy to commit murder and jailed for 20-21 years; six with conspiracy to commit grievous bodily harm, jailed for eight years.

Two of the 10 allegedly were found at later violent incidents. None of the 10 committed murder. As a statement by Kids of Colour put it: "There is no victim at the centre of this case." One of the boys, Ade Adedeji, now two years into an eight-year sentence, only participated in the group chat for a few minutes. But no matter, the cops had what they wanted, seizing on texts, drill music lyrics and other features of normal black youth culture to criminalise the 10 and put them away. Manchester MP Lucy Powell condemned the prosecution's use of "gang narratives", built on "racialised assumptions, loose associations and outdated or inaccurate stereotypes of inner-city neighbourhoods".

The 10 have a final appeal hearing in the Royal Courts of Justice, London, on 19 and 20 December and their supporters are calling for a mobilisation of support. ***Be there!***

Why the multiracial working class has an interest in supporting the Manchester 10

Use of stop and search, knife crime prevention measures and "joint enterprise" laws comprise a web of police state machinery for the purpose of tracking, entrapment and jailing of young black men. Black parents live in constant worry about the next time their child is stopped by the cops. And the sinister use of "conspiracy" charges means no actual crime needs to have occurred.

The British state has been steadily amassing laws to criminalise speech and protest. The use of anti-terror legislation has enabled a police dragnet aimed at quashing protest against Israel's genocide in Gaza and the British rulers' support to it. Muslim organisations are hounded and banned; pro-Palestinian speeches are evidence of "supporting terrorism". Climate activists are targeted as well. In July, five Just Stop Oil protesters were jailed for "conspiracy" to block a motorway.

Workers fighting for their own class interests require tactics like mass picket lines during strikes: the state will declare such a tactic to be in breach of laws banning obstruction; stopping scabs is criminal "abuse". The entire multiracial working class has a burning interest in pushing back against judicial terror. ***The trade union movement must mobilise to free the Manchester 10.***

Come to the Royal Courts of Justice on 19-20 December and demand: ***Free the Manchester 10! Overturn the convictions now!***

Donate to the Partisan Defence Committee!

Send donations to: Partisan Defence Committee
Sort code 20-10-53, Account no 60521507

Phone: 07438 878 627 ◆ Email: contact@partisandefence.org.uk
𝕏@PDCBritain ◆ @partisandefencecommittee

WHY WE DEFEND LUCY LETBY

SWNS

Lucy Letby, scapegoat for collapse of NHS.

To anyone trying to understand the Letby case, the sheer volume of information, including complex medical arguments, can seem daunting. Actually, it's quite straightforward. Lucy Letby was scapegoated for the failings of care in the hospital where she worked. She was framed up in a show trial that turned a dedicated and professional nurse into a monster who we were led to believe was a killer of tiny infants. The NHS bosses, whose entire system depends on taking advantage of the selflessness and dedication of women workers, had no qualms about pinning the blame for the system's failings on this young working-class woman.

To understand why the trade unions must take up her case, we must unpack the toxic mix of factors that led to this frame-up by the NHS bosses, the cops and courts. First of all, she worked in conditions that are typical of the collapsing NHS where patients are dying in corridors and staff are leaving in droves because they cannot do it anymore. The neonatal unit at the Countess of Chester Hospital where Lucy Letby worked treated very premature babies who by definition are high-risk. The number of baby deaths there spiked in 2015-16. The unit was short of such vital equipment as incubators and was woefully understaffed. Not to mention that, on occasion, sewage backed up into toilets and sinks. But the hospital authorities refused to tackle these problems. Rather than recruiting more nurses and doctors, or buying equipment, they looked for someone to blame. Some consultants branded Lucy Letby the "angel of death" on the grounds that she was on duty when many of the deaths occurred.

The conviction of Lucy Letby is a warning to every worker—especially but not only in the NHS—that what happened to her can happen to anyone.

Following a police investigation, Letby was put on trial on multiple murder charges. But to secure a conviction, the prosecution had a fundamental problem: there was ***no evidence*** of Lucy Letby—or anyone else—harming ***any*** child. To prove her guilt, the crucial question to be answered was, how exactly did the babies die?

The answer was provided by the leading expert witness for the prosecution, Dewi Evans, a paediatric consulting expert, who came up with a series of hypotheses that were pivotal to her conviction. He claimed that air was injected into babies' stomachs via nasogastric tubes causing air embolism. Another of his hypotheses was insulin poisoning.

His theories have since been discredited and there is an avalanche of material available that exposes the trial as completely rigged. The Crown Prosecution Service has admitted that door-swipe data submitted as evidence that Letby was alone during some baby collapses was incorrect. Post-it notes saying things like "I am evil" were presented in court as if they were her confessions of guilt. In fact, she wrote them on the advice of her therapists to help her cope with the distress she was going through. The blood tests showing sky-high insulin levels in some babies have been shown to be invalid.

The testimony provided by Evans was vital to her conviction. However, far from an independent expert witness, he had helped the police to build a case against Letby. During the trial, her defence team tried to have him removed on the grounds that he was "dogmatic and biased" but the judge rejected the challenge.

By now, Evans's theory about air embolism as the cause of death has been ridiculed by medical experts as "implausible" and "not practically feasible". Amid growing public criticism, including in a Channel 5 documentary, Evans modified his account of the cause of death of three of the seven infants (babies C, I and P) that Letby was convicted of murdering. Having originally claimed that Baby C died of air being forced into the stomach via a nasogastric tube, Evans now claims that the probable cause of death was air being forced into the veins. He denies that his change of opinion is significant. In any case, he maintains that she's guilty.

Also, as of now, medical experts working with Letby's defence team have found evidence of the likely cause of death in two of the babies (so far) showing that the theories on which she was convicted are simply wrong. One of the babies probably died due to a blunder by one of the consultants, who intended to aspirate the baby's abdomen but perforated the liver. And the basis for the conviction continues to unravel.

How to defend Lucy Letby?

Lucy Letby's barrister, Mark McDonald, has announced that he will refer her case to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, a body which examines potential miscarriages of justice. He will also try to take it back to the Court of Appeal. These legal avenues are to be welcomed, but we cannot rely on the courts. The legal review process takes forever. And history has shown that the British establishment will fight to the bitter end to uphold the honour of its "justice" system rather than admit that it locks up innocent people. The freeing of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, innocent Irish people who were framed up by the cops for bombings, took years of tenacious legal battles as well as public campaigns.

As we saw in the Post Office scandal, it took years of struggle to expose the frame-up and even then, the authorities held out to the bitter end rather than admit the truth. It is worth noting that the Post Office got away with it for so long by silencing its critics using fear of being sacked and even prosecuted, and sending people to prison to make examples of them. In a similar fashion, nurses in the NHS have been threatened with disciplinary action for speaking up in favour of Letby. One of her co-workers was warned not to provide a character statement in her defence for the trial.

The health service unions must take up the defence of Lucy Letby. When she was first targeted by some hospital consultants, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) represented her in a grievance procedure. Her grievance was upheld and consultants were forced to apologise to her. But since then, the RCN has kept a shameful silence while medical and other experts are working hard to expose her conviction as a travesty of justice. While she was RCN general secretary, Pat Cullen despicably rushed to publicly endorse the conviction of Letby. It is no surprise that Cullen would side with the establishment against Letby. On Cullen's watch, during the 2022-23 strike wave, the RCN bowed to the monarchy and refused to mount an effective struggle against the NHS bosses. The strikes ended in a demoralising defeat for the RCN which emboldened the NHS bosses to carry out further attacks on the health service.

There is an urgent need for trade unionists in the health service to defy their leaderships and build a campaign demanding justice for Lucy Letby. The union should galvanise the support for her that already exists. Nurses who worked with her knew her as a competent, caring and hard-working nurse who often worked extra shifts to cover for staff shortages. The NHS unions must push back hard against the notoriously bullying NHS bosses, who have intimidated nurses and doctors voicing support for Letby. The unions must take up the defence of Lucy Letby and build a public campaign for her freedom. She should not spend another day in prison for crimes that simply ***did not happen***. ■

Nigerian protesters face death penalty

Workers Hammer

London protest to free framed Nigerian activists, 8 November 2024.

The left and trade union movement must take action in defence of Nigerian activists. Nearly 2,500 people were arrested in August for participating in #EndBadGovernance protests against the starvation policies of the Bola Tinubu government. More than 40 were shot dead by security forces, and many of those arrested still languish in jail. Ominously, eleven face the death penalty on trumped-up treason charges. Their trial is set to begin on 29 January. ***Drop the charges now! Release all arrested protesters!***

Protesters facing treason charges

Inspired by the youthful uprising in Kenya in July, the protesters in Nigeria demanded an end to devastating economic austerity. To pay off debt imposed by the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank, in 2023 the Nigerian government abolished fuel subsidies and devalued the currency, leading to a dramatic spike in the cost of food, transportation and other necessities. The subsidies were a lifeline for many Nigerians in a country with almost no public transportation infrastructure. Coupled with soaring inflation, the austerity measures have pushed many more millions into starvation.

The Tinubu regime's brutal repression targeted protest leaders with the most draconian penalties. Socialist activists from the Youth Rights Campaign and the Solidarity Network for Workers' Rights are among those now facing the death penalty. Tortured in jail, some were released on harsh bail conditions.

Showing that this crackdown is aimed at the entire working-class movement, the government detained Nigeria Labour Congress president Joe Ajaero as he was on his way to attend the September Trades Union Congress in Britain. The Tinubu regime has also outrageously charged Andrew Wynne (also known as Drew Povey), who for years has run a pro-labour bookshop located in the headquarters of the NLC, with seeking to overthrow the government. While Wynne was not in the country at the time, police raided the bookshop and arrested his assistant Adeyemi Abayomi, one of those facing a possible death sentence.

ACT NOW!

1. **Publicise the case far and wide on social media, union newsletters and newspapers. Break the blackout of news about the repression.**
2. **Get your union to protest this outrage.**
3. **Donate to the PDC.**
4. **Organise demonstrations and protests around the world. Contact the PDC to coordinate our efforts.**

Work in trade unions—their conception and ours

The most basic task of socialists is to lead the struggles of the working class to victory. From victory in their daily struggles against the bosses to the victory over the ruling class. This, of course, requires that the mass of workers actually follow the socialists. Today, not only does the socialist movement not have sway over the majority of the working class, but most workers are at best indifferent if not outright hostile to it.

The leaders they do have, the leaders of the trade unions, led the recent strike wave to defeat in their refusal to topple the hated and weak Tory government. As a result, the unions emerged weaker, with many quitting out of frustration and anger. Fast forward to 2024, the trade union leaders all campaigned to bring the anti-working-class Starmer government to power.

Workers stand disarmed, demoralised, and saddled with a treacherous leadership. The question of how to get out of this sorry state is one that any serious would-be revolutionary must ask themselves. Our answer: we must strengthen and rebuild the unions, and that will be done ***against*** the current leadership and ***for*** a socialist leadership. So how does the left respond?

Some seek to "lead" the class by supporting (occasionally critically) the current set of betrayers, or some group of "oppositionists" who might talk militant while holding the same pro-capitalist views. Another version of the same game is "rank and file" caucuses which don't fight for a new leadership committed to a different kind of unionism but only to pressure the current one. Then there are those who close their eyes and pretend the current leadership of the class will simply disappear and suddenly the class will follow them. What they all have in common is refusing to treat the pro-capitalist leadership as an obstacle that needs to be toppled.

Workers Hammer

Spartacists at March 2023 demonstration of striking public sector unions.

Groups like the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and Communist Party all have members in union posts, from branch reps all the way to national executives. They got these posts not in competition with the pro-capitalist leaders, but in combination with them. This is always justified by saying some leaders are more militant, or more left than others. But they always make the same betrayals. They get to say they are leading workers, but all they are doing is heaping the rightful hatred of workers for these bureaucrats onto socialists as well.

In times of struggle many of these same groups form "rank and file" committees to press for a strike to be continued, or more demands made, etc. The ranks do need to be set against the tops, not just to pressure, but to overthrow them. A strike that is losing because of its leadership needs new leadership, not more demands to lose.

Groups like the Revolutionary Communist Party think that just saying "join the communists" will answer everything (or make workers forget that yesterday they supported Sharon Graham!). For their part the World Socialist Web Site often has insightful articles about the conditions of the class and betrayals of their leaders, only to then denounce the unions as a whole! Both of these strategies actually mean a non-aggression pact with the current leaders of the unions, just the flip side of the support other groups give them.

Our starting point is not to pick the best of a bad lot to work with, nor is it to ignore how bad things are. We start from the general position of the working class and how to bring forward its struggles. At the moment this is the need to regroup, protect and rebuild the unions after defeat.

From this vantage point we look at each industry, and formulate a line of struggle based on the needs of workers there corresponding with this broader strategy. The fight for rights and conditions on the job is how the unions gain the confidence of their members; that confidence is necessary to solidify the unions and recruit to them.

We call out the obstacles to carrying this out: the sabotaging strategy pursued by the pro-capitalist leaders. We formulate and fight for our demands in opposition to them. In this way we put the question of leadership where it belongs, as a test of what advances and what drags back the daily conditions and general struggle of the working class.

The articles below represent this. We sincerely hope that others on the left will join us in these fights. ■

Crisis in higher education: Prepare for the onslaught

Universities topped the list of public services that are "crumbling" according to Starmer's 10 September speech to the TUC. The Office for Students regulator forecasts over 70 per cent of higher education (HE) providers could be in the red by 2025-26; 40 per cent with less than 30 days' cash-flow. There's talk of 100 out of 140 institutions poised to make cuts and over 10,000 job losses on the horizon. Heavy layoffs and a rise in student fees are what university bosses and the new Labour government have in mind for the HE funding crisis, as tuition fees are devalued by inflation and the number of overseas students plummets.

What has been the response of the leadership of the HE unions to this catastrophic threat to the sector, its workforce and students? The University College Union (UCU) website declares "TAKE ACTION": "Email your newly elected MP"/"ask your MSPs to sign motion". How about Unison, one of the largest unions in HE? Any messages raising the alarm? Diddly-squat. As Unison HE members were worrying how long they will keep their jobs the other side of Christmas, the November/December issue of the union's magazine dropped through their letterboxes obscenely spinning Labour's budget as "A rejection of austerity and a move toward growth".

Still reeling from defeat

Things are bleak for trade unionists working at universities. It's not just that union tops are loathe to take a stand against the Starmer government they helped elect. The university bosses have been emboldened by the defeat of the 2022-23 strike wave, which demonstrated how weak and ineffectual the unions are under their current leadership. The union tops' refusal to organise the collective strength of the unions to shut down the universities translated, at some places, into UCU branch leaders scolding pickets for trying to persuade co-workers not to cross. Their assertion that the picket line was "informational" is liberal nonsense deeming strike-day sacrifices a matter of personal conscience.

Nothing was done during the strike wave to overcome workplace divisions fostered for decades by union bureaucrats happily maintaining multiple, competing unions at the same university. Branch leadership of unions not on strike, such as Unison, enforced the bosses' anti-union laws by advising members to cross the UCU picket line at the same workplace, undermining pay, terms and conditions for all.

Isolated from large sections of the workforce and students, UCU, the HE union in dispute nationally during the strike wave, was not only defeated but weakened and humiliated. Its members lost thousands of pounds and the union's strike fund was depleted by ineffective strikes and action-short-of-a-strike that followed. Despite the sacrifices of the strikers, universities remained open for business. To many university workers, and students, the unions were discredited as pointless or lame.

More, more and more of the same

Clearly this losing strategy needs to be fought by socialists. Our "Never Cross a Picket Line" campaign is an example of how we sought to fight concretely, and by example, in opposition to the bureaucracy refusing to build real picket lines and to their policy of condoning, even facilitating, scabbing on each other's unions. While we won support from individual militants, scandalously no socialist group we approached joined in this fight, which would have put us in a far better position facing today's crisis. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) refused to endorse the campaign. Rather than fighting the union tops' busted strategy, they preferred to pressure the misleadership for more of the same. In September 2023, the SWP and the UCU Left it influences in the union called to continue with the very strikes that had such little impact six months earlier. Over 70 per cent of branches voted against continuing, knowing more of the same could only aggravate the beating. For many militants, returning to the picket line in the face of mass scabbing was intolerable. Their union—the Jo Grady leadership ***and*** UCU Left—had no answer to the scabbing.

It's not enough to oppose a wing of the UCU bureaucracy for "inaction and wavering" (SWP) or "delays, retreats and general mishandling" (SP) as lessons for the current crisis. These criticisms are true, but the fundamental betrayal of the bureaucracy is left unsaid: strikes were led from beginning to end in defiance of the principles of collective

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NEU: Isolated strikes won't save the schools

Following the Labour government's announcement of an unfunded 2.8 per cent pay award for teachers next year, the NEU is set to launch an indicative ballot from 1 March to 11 April. 2.8 per cent is barely a drop in the bucket; but worse, being unfunded means it will come out of existing school budgets. This is an ***open attack*** by Labour which will push state schools one step closer to the brink: forget recruiting more teachers, many will face redundancies, which will send student outcomes plummeting even further.

Labour's attack must be fought back with the maximum strength of the union. To this extent, it is good that the NEU has called an indicative ballot. All militants in the union must build for a "Yes" vote in their schools and branches, including by recruiting new members as part of building the fightback. However, a ballot is only the opening shot. It doesn't resolve the main question: ***what strategy will win the strike?*** This is vital because there is much more at stake than just pay; it is about saving schools and students from disaster. To go forward, we must first draw the lessons from the last strike and be clear about ***what not to do.***

No to business as usual!

During the 2022-23 strike wave against the weak and despised Tories, Mary Bousted (now Baroness) and Kevin Courtney, former NEU leaders, drove the strike into the ground through an impotent strategy: spread-out strike days with symbolic picket lines that didn't shut down schools, rendering the struggle completely ineffective. This dragged out over months and sapped the morale of the rank and file, to the point that many members no longer saw the point of striking when their colleagues walked past them into schools that stayed open despite strike action. This was exacerbated by the fact that the union didn't have a real strike fund, but instead handed out scraps to some strikers from meagre hardship funds, for which members were basically means-tested. With growing numbers facing the choice between striking or paying the bills, the strike was undermined with every passing day.

Ultimately, the strike ended not because the NEU won, but because the school year ended and members were fed up and voted to accept the crumbs we got from the Tories rather than continue with a losing strategy. ***The strike ended in defeat.*** The NEU leadership and left activists can try as much as they like to pass it off as a victory, but the truth is that for union reps at schools since, trying to recruit new members is like pushing water up a hill. Wouldn't teachers and other staff be rushing to join the union if it was such a beacon of strength?

Yet this very losing strategy drives the sixth form strike today. This strike (of which most teachers aren't even aware!) is extremely isolated and weak since it extends to only 32 colleges in ***all*** of England and Wales. But the NEU continues with business as usual: it has a pathetic campaign of begging for "pay justice", with spread-out strike days and picket lines that, again, aren't making the government feel any difference. To make the courageous sacrifice of sixth form teachers worthwhile, their struggle needs a path to victory.

Militants in the NEU must reject this status quo. Saving the schools will require a real confrontation with the Labour government. Daniel Kebede strikes a tough posture about "putting the government on notice". Yet he voted for the anti-worker and pro-genocide platform of this government and hailed Reeves's 5.5 per cent pay award for teachers, a tiny drop in the leaking bucket of school funding. Has he had a change of mind? Hardly. Kebede comes from the same school of trade unionism as Bousted and Courtney. With Labour granting Bousted a peerage in the House of Lords, surely her political heir is not going to make serious trouble for the government, no matter how much "notice" it's given.

James Manning/Alamy

NEU's Daniel Kebede, all dressed up and nowhere to go.

With leaders and politics like these, forget about saving schools; their course simply spells disaster. Militants must recognise a basic fact: the union emerged ***weaker*** from the last strike. There is demoralisation among members, and outside the bubble of left activists on various WhatsApp groups, many members agree that the strike was a defeat. To go forward, the union must be put in a better position to struggle; it must be strengthened from the ground up. This can only happen with a different strategy and is all the more necessary given that Britain is no longer facing a period of labour upsurge as with the last strike, but is rapidly moving to the right.

Prepare the battle against Labour

It is necessary to struggle, but waging the upcoming struggle on the losing strategy of yesterday is reckless stupidity bound to further weaken the union. Given the current state of the NEU (many do not even know about the ballot), we should not rush to strike but spend the coming months to prepare a real battle. This should include a struggle over political strategy as well as organisational questions. Below is our platform.

Recruit! All teachers should be in the union. But reps face the difficult task of motivating why more should join. The only way to recruit is to show the ***relevance*** of the union. Typically, members only hear from the union when there is a pay campaign. But the crisis of schools is something that impacts teachers and school staff ***every day.*** The NEU must become a union that fights to improve working conditions ***now.*** This starts by changing its rules on allowing senior management in the union; teachers can't organise and push back against senior managers when they are in the union meeting! The NEU must also recruit support staff to the fullest extent. We all work at schools — their concerns are ***not*** different from ours! With unity between teachers, support and other school staff against management, it will become obvious why all school workers should join the NEU.

Build strike funds! Striking without strike funds is like going to war without ammunition. Members and reps must apply pressure, from local branches all the way to the national level, to build a war chest of strike funds so that we can stay out until the government capitulates. An easy first step would be to cut the gigantic pay of the NEU tops and force Kebede to get an average teacher's salary.

Mobilise students and parents! The government and school management's slander campaigns against teachers' strikes always involve moral blackmail about jeopardising students' learning. But there was huge support among students and parents for the last strike. This is because they experience first hand the damage done by the retention crisis: constant quits by teachers due to horrible conditions means that students simply cannot learn as they should. The NEU must campaign massively among students and parents as part of building general ***public support*** for the fight to save schools.

No support to Labour! Starmer is trying to balance the competing needs of a failing economy on the backs of public sector workers. This includes teachers. Any support to Labour is like a knife in our backs. For a working-class opposition to Labour!

Militants who agree with the above should fight for these politics at work and seek to build caucuses inside the union in order to pose a real political challenge to the existing strategy. ■

Bus drivers: Fight for our rights!

We received the following leaflet from the Committee for a Fighting Transport Union, which we are happy to reprint. It refers to the Bus Drivers' Bill of Rights, *which seeks to get some basic conditions put into bus operating contracts. A petition drive is seeking to get London mayor Sadiq Khan to sign this bill.*

The campaign for a *Bus Drivers' Bill of Rights* has done a good thing in bringing together drivers angry about the conditions we all work in. But it will not become a reality by simply pleading with Sadiq Khan. What's needed is to organise a real struggle.

Guy Smallman/Getty

London bus drivers march to TfL headquarters, 5 November 2024. Sharon Graham said she'd fight for better conditions. Still waiting.

Even if Mayor Khan of ULEZ puts this Bill of Rights in the bus contracts, we will still need to enforce it on the job. Some things, like being able to refuse a bus without working heating or air conditioning, are already our right. What we don't have is the confidence that demanding that right will be backed up by the power of our union.

Sharon Graham was elected promising to fight for jobs, pay and conditions. Three years later, we are still waiting for any of it. It is obvious our leaders won't organise a fight, so we must organise ourselves. The only way we are going to get any of our needs met is to make UNITE fight for us. Here's how:

1. **Refuse unsafe conditions!** The companies' profits are not worth our lives and livelihoods. Encourage others to do the same and demand your union's protection. Isolated, we are open to being victimised. Together, we are a force.
2. **Recruit to the union!** Too many have quit the union because they don't see it fighting for them. If we can make it fight, we can win them back and win new members, building our strength.
3. **Prepare for London-wide action!** That is what we need to improve our conditions. Not the usual token strikes at a single garage or company. Let's fight to make UNITE prepare a real confrontation to change the whole industry. We work in one city on one transport system. We should be in one union with one contract.

07907 329 659
fightingtransportunion@gmail.com
@MakeUniteFight

British far left in cloud cuckoo land

Background image Santi Chaothai/Dreamstime.com

Cloud cuckoo land: "a realm of fantasy or of whimsical or foolish behaviour". There are no better words to capture how the main British Trotskyist organisations view the current period and the prospects of the left in it.

Socialist Party (SP) leader Hannah Sell's speech last November at Socialism exclaimed how "we are at the start of an upward curve" in terms of workers struggle. She urged socialists to study the 1926 General Strike "because we are heading towards struggle on that scale again". (Her speech is available on YouTube.) The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) just concluded an important conference whose overarching theme was to "win hegemony on the radical left" by intensifying campaigns in what, they think, are good conditions (*Post-Conference Bulletin*, January 2025).

As for the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), their founding document from last year described how "Large layers, mostly of the youth, are drawing revolutionary conclusions and are attracted to communism. This is the decisive feature of the period" ("Theses on the coming British revolution", April 2024). The main article of their December newspaper was a bizarre re-write of Dickens's *Christmas carol*, in which "Sir Keir Scrooge", after adopting right-wing policies, is overthrown by millions of workers storming Number 10.

While each group has its flavour, all believe that the labour movement is in a strong position and that Labour's unpopularity will directly lead to great opportunities for the left and even a revolution. In the real world, however, what we have is a left increasingly discredited, a trade union movement weak and on the back foot and a growing mood of apathy and right-wing reaction in the working class.

How to explain such a contrast? Is it simply that they are over-optimistic, and we are too gloom-and-doom? No. The role of Marxists is to guide the working class. Your analysis of the period is supposed to inform what you must do. The wrong analysis of the SP, SWP and RCP are all rooted in wrong politics, setting the wrong tasks for workers.

One cannot speak of preparing the fight against Starmer and against the right without a clear understanding of the strength of the enemy and the current position of the working class. What is driving the wild predictions of the far left is that they are minimising and disappearing all the obstacles that stand in the way of advancing the working class. Thus, in this way, they are ***disorganising*** the struggle.

Out goes the trade union bureaucracy

First, the grand predictions of the left all downplay the reactionary role played by the trade union bureaucracy, which is propping up the Labour government and will do everything to sabotage struggle. SP leader Hannah Sell knows this. She notes in her speech that "the majority of the leaders are going to continue to attempt to shield the government" from working-class anger, and that "our job is to cohere that anger". So far, so good. But she then adds:

> "***And let's be clear: this is an objective process.*** Even if the Socialist Party didn't exist, even if we didn't have one member, these issues would be sharply debated under this government. They were even under New Labour mark one, a period of far greater social calm and capitalist growth than what we have today. But still, the Fire Brigades Union disaffiliated from the Labour Party. The RMT, the transport workers union, and particularly their late general secretary Bob Crow worked together with us to found the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition to stand in elections. So those processes will develop, but we fight to speed them up" (our emphasis).

What does this mean? For Hannah Sell, the decisive element is the "objective process", ***not*** the action of socialists, whose role is merely to speed up events which will happen anyway. The great openings she foresees will not come as a result of socialists mobilising the working class ***against*** its current leaders who are shielding the government. Rather, for her, the "objective process" will push a wing of the union bureaucracy to play a progressive role. In other words, she is waiting for a new Bob Crow.

For this, the SP is banking on Unite leader Sharon Graham, a pro-NATO bureaucrat who voted for Starmer, and for whom the SP is campaigning in the upcoming union elections. Thus, rather than leading the struggle against bureaucracy, the politics of the "objective process" amount to chaining socialists to discredited bureaucrats.

Out goes the rise of the right

Second, the belief that objective conditions are opening great opportunities for the left ignores the rise of the right wing and its growing appeal among workers. Socialists now find themselves in competition with right-wing forces for the allegiance of workers, a race we are losing by far. For the RCP, whose trademark is bombast about how the masses are turning to communism, this is a problem. Regarding what to do, RCP leader Alan Woods in his article on Trump's victory had only this to say: "Once the masses have fully explored the potential of Trumpism and realised its limitations, they will turn in a different direction. The way will be prepared for a massive swing of the pendulum to the left" (*In Defence of Marxism*, 6 November 2024).

More than a quote, this Thälmann-like approach of "After Trump and Farage, our turn" has become a mantra for RCP cadres. Under the pretext that workers must go through the experience, the RCP has developed a policy of passivity and abstention justified by the need to train cadres for the distant future. Concretely, the RCP has retreated from any serious work in the working class and the bulk of its activities consists of recruiting students who do newspaper sales and discuss dialectics and history.

It is true that a shift to the left could follow the current turn to the right, as Woods says. But this could be a matter of years. And, crucially, it will be possible only if there is a fighting pole in the working class to which workers can turn. Otherwise, the pendulum could swing further right. But this is precisely what the RCP is ***not*** building. Behind radical verbiage about communism lies an objectivist policy which leaves the bureaucracy's grip on the trade unions intact and deepens the schism between the left and the workers.

We urge the RCP to change course. A start would be to send 70 per cent of the 1200 members into working-class jobs and fight to rebuild the trade unions. This is the only antidote to petty-bourgeois radicalism and the only way to safeguard the RCP's best elements and advance the communist cause.

Out goes the crisis of the left

Thirdly, those socialists who look cheerfully at the coming period must blind themselves to the crisis of the left. As the left is weak, marginal and discredited among workers, for the SWP, this is a sign of future glories. Their recent conference adopted the following goal:

> "We want to become the leading force—ideologically and organisationally—to the left of Labour. This requires new initiatives to work with wider forces in common struggles, and to implant revolutionary politics deeper into the working class. The objective circumstances to achieve this are good."
> —SWP *Post-Conference Bulletin*, January 2025

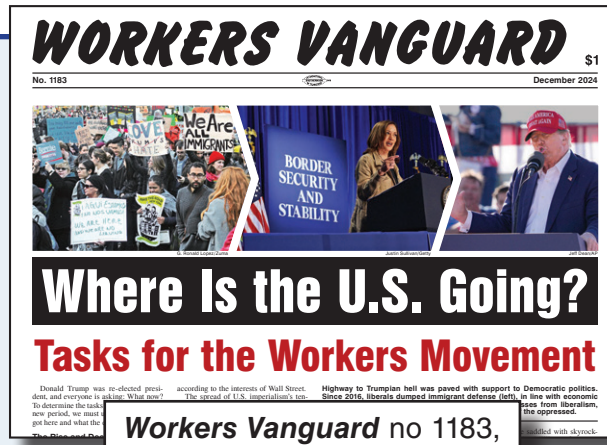
All that is lacking is effort and energy. The SWP believes all it needs to do is more of what they have already been doing. More activism in SUTR, more Palestine Solidarity Campaign. After all, objective conditions are "good".

If only SWP leaders were attuned to the winds of change, they would realise that the left is discredited because it has liquidated into liberal ideology, which is now dying everywhere under the blows of right-wing reaction. Yet, the SWP's path to hegemony consists of doubling down on campaigns whose politics are essentially liberal. Far from leading to hegemony, this is a last stand on the hill of liberal activism, which can only bring demoralisation and exhaustion.

SWP members must stop and think. The movements in which they see their salvation are at a dead end because of their liberal politics and their association with the forces of the status quo: union bureaucrats and Labourite politicians. The task at hand is to draw a hard class line against these people. By pledging to continue as the torch bearer for them, the SWP is bound to discredit itself even more.

* * *

For many on the far left, the growth of the right means the growth of the left. The weakness of the trade unions means their strength. Union leaders supporting Starmer means they will fight Starmer. The world is turned upside down. Maybe it is out of fear that telling the truth could demoralise. But the first duty of revolutionaries is to say what is, and the greatest crime is to lull socialists into cloud cuckoo land. Because, sooner or later, reality hits like a ton of bricks. Unless they radically change course, the SP, RCP and SWP are in for a rude awakening. ■


WORKERS VANGUARD $1
No. 1183 December 2024
Where Is the U.S. Going?
Tasks for the Workers Movement

Workers Vanguard no 1183, December 2024

How have the moral browbeating, broken promises and economic pain inflicted by liberals pushed the working class to the right? Why has the left's embrace of liberalism, from BLM and #MeToo to Ukraine and Gaza, spelled disaster for the oppressed? Not moralistic demonology or empty "fightback" rhetoric but a materialist understanding of what lies behind Trump's comeback. Read the latest issue of *Workers Vanguard*!

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Apathy...

(continued from page 1)

government. All their criticisms are in the framework of propping it up, milking every last drop of illusions that Starmer supposedly represents an "opportunity" for workers.

So, we have a weak and hated Labour government, clueless as it faces the country's deep problems, presiding over declining living standards and about to be battered by economic and geopolitical shocks. We have the entire leadership of the trade unions backing this lot. We have a growing mood of apathy and despair in broad layers of the population. And those reaping the fruits of discontent are Reform UK and other reactionary elements.

To be sure, Reform and Co have no more solution to the country's problems than Starmer does. They, too, are wedded to the interests of the City of London, the main parasite sucking up all the resources and deindustrialising Britain. But they have the advantage of being outside the mainstream and enjoying real support among working-class voters. This makes them an even more potent threat to Muslims, immigrants, trade unions and public services.

For militants, trade unionists, socialists and all those who want to fight for the working class, the question now is what to do. How do we fight back in this context?

The source of apathy and despair

It should be quite obvious, particularly for those involved in trade unions, that we are facing tough times ahead. Yet most of the British left is in complete denial, telling people (and themselves) a bunch of fairy tales about how great prospects are. We advise readers to look at our article on page 6, "British far left in cloud cuckoo land".

While it is key to understand that the period is difficult, this does not mean giving up. Some leftists do this by burying their heads in the sand, reading theory and history and waiting for "better times". This is just a fancy way of doing nothing, which only cedes the initiative to the right wing and the useless trade union leaders.

To pretend that everything is alright or to do nothing are not options. To go forward, it is important to understand what leads many workers to apathy, despair and right-wing reaction. Contrary to what liberals say, the problem is not merely racism, social media and the right-wing press. Confronted with impoverishment, many workers do not see any way forward to better their lives. They do not see the possibility of pushing back against the unbearable status quo through the common struggle of workers against the bosses. They end up believing that nothing can change and try to better their lot by sucking up to the boss, elbowing co-workers and opting for right-wing demagogy. Since society is not moving forward, turning against a section of it—usually Muslims or trans people—is easy. For many, it comes to make some sense that deporting millions could at least give them a bigger slice of the shrinking pie.

Because where are the alternatives? The trade union leaders have not lifted a finger to seriously better workers' conditions and position themselves as any sort of fighting force. Let's be clear: Outside the small circles of leftists who watch Novara Media and drool over Mick Lynch, most workers think that the trade union leaders are a waste of space. And rightly so. Most hear about the union once a year when pay claims arrive, only for union officials to disappear again. In many workplaces, the union exists only on paper, with no weight on the shop floor to defend workers on a day-to-day basis. Meanwhile, most workplaces have no union at all.

Many of our readers will have had the tough conversation of trying to convince co-workers to join the union only to be asked, "Why?" The response is often difficult. It can cost 20 quid a month, a chunk of it goes to Labour and the union doesn't do a damn thing. Talk about a hard sales pitch.

Yet the trade unions remain the only organisation workers have to collectively fight back. In the end, in the face of coming attacks on services and living standards, they will be the only line of defence for workers. But this is ***not*** how they are acting today. The reason is that the unions are led by spineless bureaucrats who, co-opted by the bosses, usually have more in common with Starmer than with the workers they're supposed to represent.

What about the forces claiming to be for socialism and the working class? Most of them cling to Labour or finished figures like Jeremy Corbyn. For the last decades, the left has merged so much with the liberal wing of the upper and middle class that it is now largely discredited in the eyes of workers. For many, a socialist is someone who supports the EU and "green" taxes like ULEZ, calls everyone who even questions immigration a "racist", or glues himself to the motorway (see "To build a workers party…you need workers", page 9). It is no wonder that many are turning their backs on the left and the trade unions. For workers bled by inflation, the only people out there who seem to be fighting are Nigel Farage and Tommy Robinson.

It is necessary to understand these dynamics in order to fight back. Otherwise, one just falls into cynicism, as if all could be explained because "people are backward". Ideas reflect the conflict of classes and are shaped by living forces. The rise of the right and the current dire situation are conditioned by a dramatic drop in living standards and important changes in the world—like the decline of the US Empire, which, in the ruling class, is provoking a shift away from liberalism and into right-wing reaction. However, crucially, the situation is also conditioned by the total failure of the official leadership of the working class to provide a progressive alternative to the current crisis. This is true in Britain just as elsewhere. So, let's look at this a little more.

The main obstacle: the union bureaucracy

The 2022-23 strike wave was a tremendous opportunity for the trade union movement to go on the offensive, deal a blow to the hated Tory government and get back into a fighting position after years of defeat. But the leaders of the trade unions refused to do that. They disorganised the strikes and made sure they would remain as inefficient as possible because they feared more than anything throwing the government into crisis. The result was largely a defeat. Isolated strikes got pay rises already eaten by inflation (RMT, NEU, RCN, etc), and many unions came out

continued on page 8

Matt Cardy/Getty

Mass layoffs at Port Talbot steelworks: another nail in coffin of British industry. Labour has no clue how to fix crumbling economy.

Retiring, mission accomplished

Carl Court/Getty

"Mick Lynch says voters must 'grow up' and see Starmer is only alternative"
— *Guardian*, 24 February 2024

Exchange on "coconuts"

11 July 2024

Dear comrades,

I write to you referring to the endorsement of the phrase 'coconut' as satire in Workers Hammer no. 253. I have encountered the usage of this phrase across my adult life at work and at college and argued against it each time. It's not used just in politics but as a criticism of attitude and behaviour: too friendly with them (white colleagues/students) and not us at college, interests too 'white' (rock music). It often, if not always, portrays whiteness as somehow morally tainted, a betrayal. It is the flipside of the racist phrase, "play the white man", that suggests whites play by the rules in business and life in general, while brown skinned people are devious, underhanded, and not to be trusted. The woman in question, Marieha Hussain, should be defended by WH against cop attacks on the pro-Palestinian demonstrators all the while arguing against her liberal messaging. Did she want Sunak to be more like Modi or Rajapaksa? The 'coconut' term to me is straight out of the BLM handbook and the endorsement of it as satire seems to run counter to the thrust of the latest Spartacist.

Comradely,
Paul C.

***Workers Hammer* replies:**

22 January 2025

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your letter, which I really appreciated. Growing up in the Asian diaspora, I am no stranger to this term. However, until reading your letter, I thought of it as a generally harmless way to make fun of Asians who have become so assimilated into Western society that they only have white friends, or no longer know how to speak their parents' language, or can only cook Western food, etc. In other words, those who have veered "too far" from their "mother culture" towards that of the "white people".

Approaching this now from your point of view, I can see how it implies that "whiteness [is] somehow morally tainted, a betrayal". I would, however, like to qualify this slightly. While I now agree with you that this term is not mere satire and its usage must be opposed, I think we need to see that the sentiment behind this term embodies a certain contradiction. On the one hand, it expresses the desire on the part of immigrants and immigrant-derived people to preserve an aspect of their national (or subnational) identity against the pressures of assimilation. It is a desire on their part to hold on to certain aspects of their culture, which is a good thing.

At the same time, it has its regressive side. The diaspora upholds all manner of conservatism precisely under the guise of "holding on to culture". This is especially oppressive to youth and women—for example, not being allowed to date, go out, drink, or marry outside the religion or race. And this is when this sentiment gets expressed against "whiteness". This side must be rejected.

Not only is this oppressive to minorities within the diaspora, it is also a complete obstacle to building unity in the multiracial working class. It tells brown-skinned workers that they are traitors if they reject certain regressive aspects of their culture, and it tells white workers that their culture is somehow inferior and undesirable. It displaces class divisions in society, which communists want to bring to the fore, and reinforces racial divisions, which communists want to overcome.

I will conclude by noting that when we wrote our defence of Marieha Hussain, we were not endorsing this term uncritically, but in fact, we were unconscious of its political implications. So, I thank you for rendering it conscious.

Communist greetings,
Mansa Kaur

Apathy...

(continued from page 7)

of the strikes weak and crippled. Think of the UCU and the CWU, where swathes of militants were victimised and demoralisation swept through the membership.

The strike wave also revealed the organisational weakness of the trade unions. Many unions did not even have a strike fund. Many organised only a tiny fraction of workers and competed with multiple other unions, negotiating separately. Everywhere, crossing picket lines was widespread and accepted. Decades of defeat and misleadership have hollowed out what used to be bastions of working-class power.

The defeat of the strike wave was a boost for Reform UK and the right wing. Remember, during the winter of 2022-23, everyone was talking about the cost-of-living crisis and how to save the NHS and the schools. A year later, nothing had changed, but no one was talking about these anymore.

So, when the pro-Palestine movement erupted, the trade unions played zero role in it. Union leaders knew very well that any concrete action for Palestine would draw the ire of Keir Starmer and the Labour Party tops, who support Israel to the hilt. Occasional solidarity speeches aside, they sat on their hands and the movement, despite widespread support, remained impotent and has now lost its momentum. Then, the union bureaucrats all poured money and resources into electing Starmer's government.

Last October, the trade unions, particularly the NEU, massively publicised the Stand Up to Racism (SUTR) march against Tommy Robinson's demo in London. This was necessary. But the politics of the demo had the strong smell of a pro-government rally. This explains why, despite the mobilising efforts of the unions, the base did not turn up and the right wing had larger numbers. In fact, there were probably more workers with Robinson than with the unions. This was an implicit vote of no confidence in the union leaders and the Labourite left, and a sinister warning.

All this is to say that the current context of right-wing reaction is not just an objective process but has everything to do with the betrayal of the leaders of the organised labour movement. At every step, it was totally possible to act differently and position the trade union movement as a lightning rod for the massive discontent in society. But this required confronting the whole ruling class, something the union leaders refused to do. Now that they have "their" man in Number 10, they will do their utmost to rein in struggles. And with the rise of Reform UK, they will seek to close ranks behind Starmer, which can only further discredit the trade union movement.

How to go forward

The coming period promises shocks, whether it be Trump's policies, an economic crisis or the outcomes of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. These crises will hit Britain hard, and the ruling class will make workers pay. With a right wing in an upswing, a discredited left and the trade unions propping up this hated government, the task for socialists is not to launch reckless offensives but to fight to put the workers movement in a better ***defensive*** position.

For this, socialists must turn to the working class and fight to improve its most basic conditions. We must seek to engage as much as possible in workplace struggles, as minimal as they may be, with the aim of building and reinforcing the trade unions for what's coming. In this tough period, a campaign as ABC as organising co-workers to push back against management encroachments and abuses or to turn up the heat in freezing workplaces could be a real step forward.

None of this is new for those active in trade unions. But what is always lost is that this cannot be done without ***complete opposition to the trade union leaders and their strategy***. The union tops will prove to be obstacles in the struggle for even the most basic demands, not only because they support the current government but also because they support the entire system. They will turn every initiative into a routinist dead end and divert any meaningful struggle into an impotent pressure campaign on Labour. The worst thing socialists can do is to associate themselves in any way with these people.

Yet the main mistake militants commit when engaging in trade union struggle is that they always orient towards this very union bureaucracy. Instead of looking to the base of workers and seeking to mobilise them for what's needed, they look to the upper echelons of the unions. Sometimes this appears easier. The branch rep might be a leftist and look like the only one who cares about the union. But this only reinforces the problem. Most workers are alienated from union activities, which too often are sandboxes for leftists who do not amount to anything. And the one thing union bureaucrats are good at is co-opting honest militants and transforming them into lawyers for their bankrupt strategy. This is the trap many socialists fall into (see "Work in trade unions — their conception and ours", page 4).

Workers Hammer

Spartacist contingent at 26 October 2024 London march against Tommy Robinson.

This is why any push for improving working conditions must be directed at mobilising the base of the workforce and denouncing the policy and strategy of the union leadership every time they hamper this effort, whether it is their inaction and crawling in front of the government or their pushing for reckless actions without proper preparation. All this must be rooted in the particulars of the industry in question. *Workers Hammer* is more than ready to assist anyone to push back, and we encourage our readers to have a look at the concrete examples of what our co-thinkers are doing in various unions (pages 4 and 5).

This is the only way to get a hearing from those workers who have become cynical and disgruntled, and who might even have quit the union. To the earlier question of why join the union, this is the response: the union is our only defence, we need to make it fight for us, and this isn't happening because its leaders are hitching our interests to those of the government and the bosses. We cannot leave our union in their hands.

That is why, as socialists, we are not anti-leadership. The question is what kind? We stand for real socialists leading the unions, and so we are very much against the fakers currently in place. Only with the understanding that ultimately workers must run the country can one lead the day-to-day battles of our class in a progressive direction.

Connecting the struggle for the most basic and urgent demands to the struggle to transform the trade union movement from within is how you can push back against apathy and despair. It is also how we can rebuild the authority of socialists among workers and undermine the appeal of the right wing. You can have all the arguments you want with co-workers who look to Reform UK. But in the end, the rubbish in their heads will clear only if through their day-to-day experiences they can see that the trade unions and collective struggle are the way to resist the destruction of living standards.

This gets to the problem with campaigns like Stand Up to Racism. Anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry are tools of the bosses to divide workers. They can be combatted only 1) through common struggle against the rulers and 2) by connecting the defence of minorities with the interests of white workers. But SUTR is a PR campaign designed for the union bureaucracy to avoid doing just that. Its liberal and moralist politics end up targeting white workers rather than the ruling class, the source of racial oppression, which only pushes them towards the right. This is how liberal politics ends up further dividing the working class rather than defending minorities (see "How London liberals fuel the far right", *Workers Hammer* no 254, Autumn 2024).

The task now for socialists is to do the painstaking work of rebuilding trade union power. It will not be easy. We are swimming against the stream and are isolated. But it is necessary to fight. Hold on tight and keep the bigger picture in mind. If done right, the preparatory work we do now can better position the workers movement in the battles ahead. ■

Spartacist candidate in German elections

German elections scheduled for 23 February pose the burning need for working-class opposition to the social democrats and trade union leaders, whose treachery has prepared the ground for a right-wing victory. This is the struggle being waged by socialist dock worker Toralf Endruweit, a candidate in Hamburg-Wandsbek on the Internationalist List of the Marxist-Leninist Party (MLPD).

Toralf helped lead the fight against the MSC port privatisation deal in Hamburg which was pushed through last year with the collusion of the ver.di trade union leaders. A supporter of the Spartakist Workers Party and the Harbour Workers Committee for a Fighting ver.di, Toralf sees his campaign as the first step in forging an anti-imperialist current in the workers movement. Here is his programme:

Against war and crisis
WORKERS TO POWER!

1. **No to NATO!**
   No support, no weapons for Ukraine and Israel!
2. **Stop deindustrialisation!**
   Let Russian gas and oil in! Down with the sanctions!
3. **Free Palestine!**
   Stop the anti-Muslim witch hunt!
   Against the repression and all bans!
4. **Workers: Take the harbour in your hands!**
   Tear up the MSC deal!

Hafenarbeiterkomitee

Toralf Endruweit, docker & socialist

- **No vote to the SPD and Left Party labour traitors!**
- **Neither the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance nor the reactionary AfD are alternatives.**
- **Vote for Toralf and the Internationalist List/MLPD!**

Internationalistische Liste
MLPD

To build a workers party... you need workers

With a right-wing Labour government in power and Trump and Reform UK setting the political agenda, there are currently a lot of discussions among leftists about the need to create a new left party. The need for a working-class and socialist alternative to Starmer's Labour is dire, and we support any initiative in this direction. However, the current discussions among various left groups have brought to the surface everything that is wrong with the British left, and provide examples of how ***not*** to advance this goal.

This starts with the group Collective, linked to Jeremy Corbyn, Len McCluskey and many others. They had a series of closed meetings whose main purpose seems to have been convincing Corbyn to launch a party…only for him to refuse. Carla Roberts's coverage in the *Weekly Worker* did a pretty good job of showing how this band of finished Labourites is hopeless, so we will not dwell on it.

Finally, many are realising that waiting for Jeremy can't be the only strategy for the left. This is the context in which *Prometheus* issued a call for a debate on the need for a new party, with many individuals and groups (CPGB, RS21, *Why Marx?*, etc) responding. But we need to be frank: the discussion so far has been a talk shop centred around organisational matters. What type of structure should a party have? What sort of democracy would it need? An electoral alliance or a party? Should it have a paper press or an online one? And on and on.... Nothing of substance has been written on why the left is so weak and divided. And, crucially, what should this new party fight for? If this debate is to be useful, it must be pursued on a different basis.

No programme, no party

It seems many in this discussion assume that the reason the left is weak and divided is simply because no one has ever thought of bringing everyone together before. It is in vogue to denounce the "sects". Very well. But many who rage against the "sects" often happen to be members of one. The divided state of the left is not an organisational issue. It is not something that can be solved by amalgamating existing groups around a vague commitment to communism.

The left is weak and divided because it lacks a programme that can unite the working class against the British imperialist rulers. When we say programme, we do not mean an abstract description of the goals of communism and a list of general, timeless positions. This is what the CPGB draft programme is, and it is no basis for unity. A programme is a guide to ***action*** to advance the interests of the working class. It must draw the lessons of the preceding struggles, lay out an understanding of the specific period we are in, confront the obstacles in the way and set the tasks of communists. While it does not resolve everything, this is what we tried to do in our document "The breakdown of US hegemony & the struggle for workers power" (*Spartacist* no 68, September 2023).

So, if we come down from the clouds of abstraction and get into the real world, what is obvious is that the left is weak and discredited and growing numbers of workers are turning to the right. Any discussion about a new left party should start by explaining why this is and what to do about it.

Why is the left weak and divided?

The past three decades have been characterised by the hegemony of the US empire, whose ideological pillar was post-Soviet liberalism. Throughout this period, most of the radical left essentially adapted to liberalism, positioning itself as its most radical wing. Most socialists pursued alliances with liberal elements, middle-class intellectuals and trade union bureaucrats—forces all tied to the liberal wing of the ruling class. Other socialists stood on the sidelines, clinging to Marxist purity and doing nothing to address the problem (which is what our organisation did until our recent reorientation).

Meanwhile, the working class was being pummelled by the rulers in the name of these very lofty liberal principles and institutions. Just think of Blairism or the EU. As a result, the working class increasingly came to hate liberals and everyone associated with them. But since the far left became indistinguishable from the liberal camp, workers turned their backs on it, looking instead to politicians like Trump or Farage and seeing in racist and "anti-woke" demagogy an alternative to the unbearable status quo.

The Corbyn movement is a prime example of this. Corbyn first generated enthusiasm among workers but spent years conciliating the Blairites. He campaigned for "remain" and then for a second referendum, hopelessly trying to appease them. As for the far left, it latched on to Corbyn uncritically. The price to pay was that millions of workers turned their back on the left and looked to Johnson and Reform UK.

This is why the left is so weak: it is enmeshed with liberals. And as a result, workers have been deserting the left, which is now almost entirely made up of middle-class people, a fact reflected in the pages of *Prometheus* itself. The endless exchanges on organisational questions are typical obsessions of the petty bourgeoisie.

So, the task of revolutionaries is to fight within the left for a rupture with the liberals and to turn to the working class and fight for what it needs. The radical left is in competition with Reform UK for the allegiance of the working class. Saying this might shock liberals, but it is just true. This does not mean adapting to Farage, which is the mistake of Galloway's Workers Party. It means being able to tap into the same discontent and provide it with a class-struggle road against the ruling class. To do so, socialists have to declare war on liberalism—starting in our own movement.

Turn to the working class

This is why those who propose any sort of orientation towards the Green Party are wrong. Socialists need this like a hole in the head. The Greens are a party of the liberal middle class, supporting anti-working-class taxes like ULEZ and the pillars of the liberal imperialist order, like NATO and the EU. Any association with these people would be political suicide and a gift to Farage.

Equally wrong is Mike Macnair's view that "it is not the job of the party to give tactical direction to trade unions or to individual strikes" (*Prometheus*, 26 November 2024). What is the point of a communist party if it isn't to guide the struggles of workers? Communists will not win workers with theoretical treatises, but only if we can prove in struggle that our strategy is superior to that of Labourite union bureaucrats. Macnair's conception simply ends up leaving those people in charge of the trade union movement.

To turn to the working class and get involved in its struggles; to stand in complete opposition to the ruling class, the liberals and trade union bureaucrats; to place our hopes in the class struggle and not in Corbyn or any other Labourite "saviour"—these are the tasks of communists. Much more could be said. We urge readers to study the current issue of *Workers Hammer*, which embodies the type of party we want to build. ■

Higher Ed...

(continued from page 4)

trade union struggle, which is what allowed their defeat and puts us in a weaker position today. For the SWP and SP comrades not to face up to this risks bringing socialists into disrepute as the militant wing of the bankrupt trade union bureaucracy.

For a defensive struggle built on strength

Today, the SWP and SP call to link the fight over the pay dispute to the fight against redundancies, cuts and tuition fees. Socialists must indeed campaign for YES in upcoming Unison and UCU strike ballots, to allow the option to strike and not show weakness to the bosses. But our campaign must motivate a different strategy, to strengthen and build our unions, so strikes won't be isolated to a minority of the workforce. This will also convince members to vote YES.

Our collective strength is all we've got against the bosses. At each step to rearm our unions, from strike pay reserves to challenging anti-union laws, we must overcome ***in practice*** resistance and diversions of the current union misleaders, forging a different leadership committed to the class struggle and its methods. We call on academics, cleaning, maintenance, support staff AND students to prepare a united fightback in HE.

Raise the alarm—build trade union power!

- Recruit to the trade unions, collectively refuse additional workloads and maximise strike funds.
- While there is not one union for all HE workers: joint action by the unions so when one is out, all are out.
- Never cross a picket line! Overturn the policy of union branch leaderships instructing members to scab on other unions' strikes! Union defence for all who don't cross!
- Stand against bosses' intimidation. Union defence of academic freedom and rights of workers and students to oppose the genocide and oppression of Palestine!

Open the accounts! The cycle of redundancies and cuts shows the bosses can't be trusted with the finances. We need to know just how bad things are. The unions must fight, on a sector-wide basis, for the accounts to be opened to us.

Abolish tuition fees! The funding model is as broken as the British economy. The burden must not fall on students but financiers responsible for an economy based on speculative parasitism. Counting on Starmer's Labour to fully fund the sector is a ridiculous diversion that weakens the fightback and discredits the unions. For student grants tied to inflation as part of mass trade union struggle across all sectors to reindustrialise Britain, providing decent jobs, health care, housing and education for all! The City of London will say this is unaffordable; then we can't afford the City. Utilise universities and colleges to reskill the population: Worthwhile jobs for graduates; an economy for the masses! ■

Palestine...

(continued from page 1)

it appears to be benefiting from strong popular support for having led the resistance effort against Israel. It will surely continue to constitute a threat to Israeli security. But at this time its capabilities are much reduced, and it will need many years to build up the strength needed to launch an operation like 7 October. Moreover, it will no doubt be a huge challenge to govern the ruins which constitute Gaza today. It remains to be seen how the population will evolve politically in the inhumane conditions it finds itself in. Hamas will face this challenge with a core of tested soldiers, but with many of its most capable political leaders assassinated.

Hezbollah has also not been crushed but has suffered debilitating blows. Its entire top command has been murdered and much of its offensive capacity has been destroyed by Israel's bombing and its invasion of southern Lebanon. But even more devastating are the self-inflicted political blows. Hezbollah's roots in Lebanon's confessional system entailed restricting its popular support to the Shiite sect, and a conservative military approach of "strategic patience" in confronting the Israelis and Americans. Moreover, its failed, bloody and costly intervention in Syria only alienated it from more layers of the Arab and Muslim world.

The result is clear: time after time Israel committed unimaginable provocations and crimes but prompted only very measured responses from Hezbollah. This obvious conciliation and political paralysis dealt a severe blow to the movement and will no doubt have consequences on its standing within Lebanon and the broader Arab world.

The Houthis come out of this phase of the conflict in a rather strong position. They more than any other party in the Muslim world dealt serious military and strategic blows to Israel. Despite the combined might of the US, Israel, Britain and other allies, the Houthis were never cowed and maintained the capacity to severely disrupt trade in the Red Sea and strike Israel directly. We can be sure that the pause in hostilities in Gaza will lead to a redoubling of imperialist efforts to crush the Houthis. However, their religious-nationalist programme (eg their infamous slogan "Curse on the Jews") and the sectarian basis of their leadership will hamper their ability to resist.

The collapse of Syria more than any other development has dealt a severe strategic blow to the Axis of Resistance. In the long term, a more volatile Syria will be a problem for Israel. But for the moment, the crisis has allowed Israel to destroy much of Syria's military equipment and has opened the door to even more Zionist occupation of Syrian land. The collapse of this pivotal member of the Axis of Resistance has also cut supply lines between Iran and the Levant.

Ramez Habboub/Future Publishing

Gaza, 27 January: Palestinians return home after ceasefire.

Iran's position is somewhat contradictory. On the military level, it was able to demonstrate that it had advanced capabilities, which can deal significant damage to Israel. Moreover, Netanyahu's best attempts at dragging the US into a war with Iran have failed, and Iran's nuclear sites are intact. However, on the political level Iran finds itself more isolated and divided; it lost a key ally in Assad and also frustrated its allies by its restraint.

As we explained in "Why can't anyone stop Netanyahu?" (*Spartacist* supplement, 4 October 2024), Iran's leadership is torn between pursuing a course of conciliation and engaging in a frontal conflict with the US. The latter option would not only come at a huge cost but would also find Iran isolated in a region which for the most part despises its clerical Shia regime.

The overall strategic reality is much more mixed than that portrayed by those claiming Israel suffered defeat on all fronts. Moreover, the historic objective of the Zionist project—to expand its borders according to biblical myth—has also progressed. Not only has Israel occupied more territory, stepped up its offensive in the West Bank and left Gaza unliveable, but it was also able to mobilise its population in a hitherto unprecedented genocidal frenzy.

Myth of Israeli collapse

It is certainly true that whatever success Israel has had, it has come at a high cost in terms of military losses, financial expenses and diplomatic clout. But it is absurd to claim that Israel is anywhere near ultimate defeat.

A persistent myth is that Israel is a brittle foe which will collapse under pressure, just like white domination in South Africa, French colonial rule in Algeria and the pro-US South Vietnamese regime. Brutal colonial repression is a common denominator in all these examples. But Israeli society is much more insulated economically and socially from the native population than were the white colonial regimes in Algeria and South Africa, which depended on the labour of native subjects. Israel is also not a simple puppet regime like that of South Vietnam, which had little base of support domestically. Rather, Israel has been able to build a nation-state with a relatively advanced economy, making it a more formidable and lasting foe than other colonial states.

This does not mean that Israel is invulnerable, but it does speak in favour of knowing what the actual foundations of its power are and how to undermine them. These are not intangible concepts, such as the potency of its national myths and global public opinion. Zionist power rests on material facts. It must maintain internal cohesion, unwavering support from US imperialism and regional divisions. Only by decisively undermining these three pillars can we truly open the road to Palestinian freedom.

Perspectives for Palestinian liberation

The worst mistake made by the Axis of Resistance is to think that it can simply outlast Israel. The immense pressure on Israeli society since 7 October and its growing international isolation have not made Israel any less dangerous. Rather like a wounded beast, the Zionist state is only becoming more violent, frantic and unpredictable as it senses its strength faltering. Palestine cannot afford to simply survive; it needs a strategy which can lead to full liberation as swiftly and efficiently as possible. For this we must look at what has worked and what hasn't in the past 15 months.

The Israeli genocide has provoked unprecedented movements of solidarity with the Palestinian people. While these have garnered mass support and attention, they have not been translated into much political or military success. The central reason is that the pro-Palestinian movement has overwhelmingly been unable to connect with domestic working-class discontent. Rather, it is perceived as a somewhat distant cause mainly requiring moral indignation.

To give the movement real teeth, including the ability to stop weapons and goods being shipped to Israel, it must stop directing its energies towards lobbying governments or institutions fully committed to Israel. It must show the working class in every country how its own oppression at the hands of imperialism is connected to the Palestinian struggle. This will not happen through the liberal moralising or religious preaching of the movement's current leaders. It is urgent that the international Palestinian movement reorient and ensure that it has a more proletarian, anti-imperialist orientation in the next phase of its struggle.

When it comes to tensions within Israel, they have increased considerably. However, this has not translated into any significant manifestation of solidarity with the Palestinians or anyone else in the region. Whatever the intent of 7 October, its consequence was to fuse Israeli society into a genocidal mania. There can be no question of Palestine abandoning armed struggle; impotent diplomatic negotiations will lead nowhere. But the struggle must be waged in a way which will exacerbate the fissures within Israel. Each Israeli civilian death does more to foster support for Palestinian oppression than to undermine Israel. Militarily and strategically, such attacks are counterproductive.

War is the continuation of politics by other means: a religious-nationalist strategy will employ military tactics pushing confrontation along national and religious lines. Given Israel's overwhelming military superiority, Palestine cannot hope to win through a direct confrontation with the entire Israeli nation. Sentimental appeals to the liberal Zionist wing of the ruling class are no better. In contrast, a strategy of proletarian internationalism would orient its actions towards splitting the Israeli nation along class lines, paralysing its military apparatus and breaking it from within. Socialists in the resistance must elaborate such a strategy, put its tactics into practice and show how it is more effective.

One of the most lamentable roles in the Gaza genocide has been played by the Muslim regimes allied to the US. While they mumbled words of disapproval under pressure from their populations, they did not lift a finger to support the Palestinians, Lebanese, Houthis or Iranians. A central focus for the resistance must be to foment and organise struggle against these treacherous pawns of imperialism.

In most cases the opposition within Muslim countries is either religious or liberal pro-imperialist. It is blatantly obvious that neither of these platforms can unify the region against Israel and the US, let alone deliver democratic rights and economic development. To throw imperialism out and liberate Palestine, it is necessary to unleash popular sentiments for democratic and social change behind working-class leadership, the only force in the region which has an unalloyed interest in the full democratic rights of every nation and religion and does not benefit in any way from conciliating US imperialism.

These key lessons must be discussed and debated. Over-optimism will not help the Palestinians in the slightest. Now is the time to regroup the most determined elements of the pro-Palestinian movement and socialist left into a fighting party capable of leading Palestine to a true victory. ***Forward to a red and free Palestine!*** ■

Syria...

(continued from page 12)

This all goes to show that the task was not to defend the Assad tyranny, but to overthrow it in a ***progressive way***. However, this is clearly ***not*** what happened.

The failure of the democratic revolution

How did the movement against Assad, which started as a spontaneous uprising for democratic rights, become increasingly dominated by reactionary Islamist forces and an open playing field for foreign powers? We have already seen how the Assad regime itself contributed towards this evolution. But this is only half the story. To get the whole picture, it is also necessary to look at the dynamics and failures within the opposition and various rebel groups.

In countries governed by dictatorships that are antagonistic to the West, there is a strong tendency among progressives to look to imperialist democracies as a counterweight. The example of the Syrian civil war shows just how fatal a mistake this is. At bottom, it is faith in Western democracy more than anything else which explains why Assad was eventually overthrown by obscurantist Islamist forces rather than by a movement representing the revolutionary democratic aspirations that initially roused the peoples of Syria.

As Assad deployed his security forces to brutally crush discontent, local militias sprung up to defend communities. Eventually defections started to spread among government forces. Throughout the civil war, socialist and working people needed to stand in defence of communities under the threat of sectarian massacres. However, what started as heroic movements of self-defence eventually became a military campaign against the government, subordinated to Western imperialist interests. This not only brought about military disaster but betrayed any hope for a democratic and social revolution in Syria.

A 2016 report by Félix Legrand of the Arab Reform Initiative details some of the reasons for the marginalisation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main rebel force in the initial stage of the civil war. The first thing the report notes (but can't explain) is how political fragmentation paralysed the FSA. This is because the FSA represented two self-contradictory forces. On one hand the popular aspirations for democratic and social progress and on the other the interests of foreign powers.

Erik de Castro/Reuters

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces take city of Raqqa, 2017. Kurdish nationalists' reliance on US overlords spells disaster for liberation struggle.

Because of its subordination to imperialism, the FSA was never going to be able to unite the working people of Syria in common struggle against the economic interests of the elite and for democracy. After all, the US and its allies are all absolutely opposed to the emergence of a strong, democratic—much less socialist—Syrian state. And so, the democratic programme of the FSA was ultimately incoherent and only on paper. In contrast to this, both Islamist and Kurdish forces could unify around a common project, religious for the former, national democratic for the latter.

In the conclusion of his report, Legrand notes that:

> "For the FSA, it is precisely their inability to resist foreign backers and to develop some leverage over the decisions imposed on them that has pushed them to the margins of the battlefields."

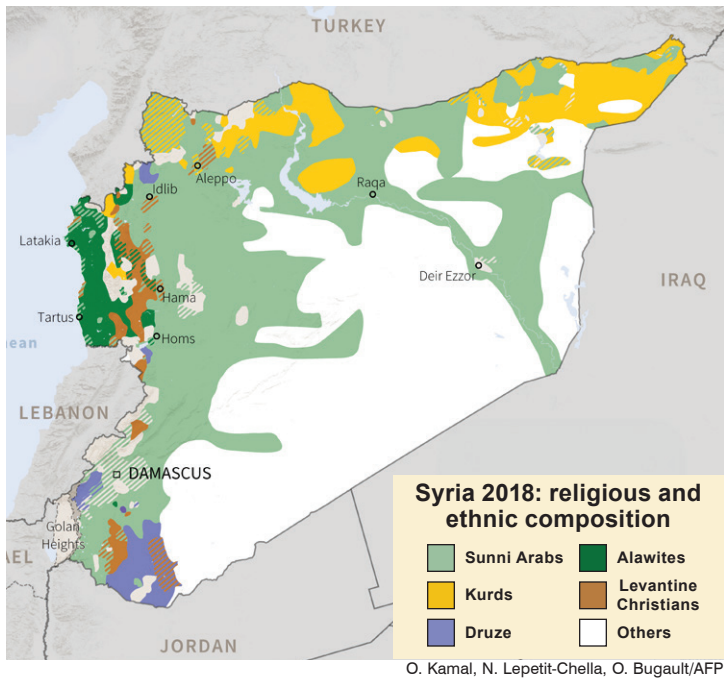
Sure enough, as the civil war evolved it became more and more obvious to all that the FSA did not represent any kind of movement to liberate the Syrian people but was a tool of Washington. This was most clearly seen in the fact that it was forced multiple times to cease hostilities against Assad in favour of asserting more pressing interests for the US, whether it was the fight against ISIS or securing the Jordanian border.

This docile subservience was rightly branded as treachery by the Islamist forces and contributed to large-scale defection in the ranks of the FSA. As the civil war unfolded, the FSA became increasingly irrelevant, and Islamist forces more and more became the only real military opposition to Assad.

What then was the correct course for those hoping for a social and democratic revolution in Syria? Continue to support the "democratic" FSA and lobby for more Western support? No. The support the West gives is never worth the price of political subservience demanded in return. Much less was it correct to call for direct military intervention, as many did. That would have only meant enslavement of Syria to imperialism—an outcome even worse than the one we confront today. What about the Islamist forces? Was it necessary to support them as the only force objectively carrying forward the struggle against Assad? Obviously not. Their victory no more represents progress than the continued rule of Assad. Those who doubt it will see for themselves soon enough.

What was necessary, but absent throughout the conflict, was a real fight among the democratic forces for a total break with subordination to the US. Accepting weapons from wherever one can get them is one thing, but becoming a slave to the most reactionary powers in the world in the process is another. A clear and principled opposition to the US and its proxies would have made it possible to make the fight against Assad a component part of the liberation of the entire region from imperialism. On the one hand this would have undercut the appeal of the regime, which presented itself as the only defender of Syrian national independence. But it would also have contributed to making the conflict a true democratic and national uprising, providing the basis to polarise and split the various sectarian and religious factions.

Ultimately, the key lesson is that it was only in opposition to the US and Israel that a radical democratic, socialist, solution could emerge in Syria.



O. Kamal, N. Lepetit-Chella, O. Bugault/AFP

Syria: Patchwork of peoples carved out by British and French. Only common struggle against imperialism can forge unity.

The Kurdish question

For many, especially in the left in Türkiye and Western Europe, the Kurdish forces led by the People's Defence Units (YPG) represent a true revolutionary and democratic alternative in the Syrian civil war. It is true that the national democratic uprising in Rojava had the potential of being a real beacon for national liberation and social progress throughout West Asia. However, no less than the FSA, the Kurdish forces regrouped in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have become subservient to the US and have thus been playing an overall reactionary role.

It was one thing to accept help from the US and be in an objective alliance when faced with the threat of ethnic extermination. This was the case in the 2014 siege of Kobane by ISIS forces. And it was a sterile and reactionary absurdity to deny a people the means to defend themselves however they can in such a situation[1]. However, it was quite another matter to launch a joint offensive with US troops in territories inhabited overwhelmingly by Arabs, as was done by the SDF.

Of course, ISIS represented an extremely reactionary force and was a threat to all religious and national minorities in the region. However, their strength lay first and foremost in the brutal oppression of the Sunnis following the US invasion of Iraq. The military defeat of ISIS did nothing to tackle the root of the problem. Quite the contrary; the large-scale devastation brought down on cities like Raqqa by the US, with the help of Kurdish forces, will only foster more resentment.

From being a potential beacon for revolutionary anti-imperialist resistance, the YPG and Kurdish forces are now seen as agents of the US by many in the region. For example, they are directly responsible for the plundering of Syrian oil for the Americans. Nothing shows the bankrupt position of the Kurdish leadership more than their tiptoeing around the Palestinian genocide in Gaza so as not to offend their allies. The Kurdish national movement has been conspicuously absent in the international struggle against Israel since 7 October and has recently engaged in diplomatic dialogue with Tel Aviv. While the Palestinian question could be the perfect bridge towards uniting the cause of the Kurds with those of the rest of the region, including in Türkiye, the lack of concrete action by Kurdish leftist organisations in defence of Palestine once again isolates the Kurds, making them more vulnerable to future attacks and more dependent on the US.

It is urgent that the Kurdish national movement break the alliance with the US on its own terms. This is not only essential for the liberation of the entire region from the clutches of US imperialism, but for the national and social liberation of the Kurds themselves in Syria and beyond.

What next?

The collapse of the Assad regime has created a certain vacuum and openness for political debate. This opportunity will probably not last very long and must be seized to organise struggle against the new regime and bring about a political realignment. What has been lacking throughout the civil war is a genuinely anti-imperialist, democratic and socialist alternative. The task we face is to build such an alternative, drawing from the lessons of the civil war.

First, only through opposition to imperialist oppression of the entire region can we begin to unite the peoples of West Asia. Workers and peasants, from Türkiye, Kurdistan, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq are all oppressed by the international system ruled by the US. The starting point must be to oppose the economic and military predation of the US and its allies, notably Israel which is expanding its conquest of southern Syria and Lebanon.

Second, true unity against foreign oppression can only be achieved through recognition of the democratic rights of religious and national minorities. The imperialists designed the region to divide its people; only genuine self-determination can heal these wounds. We must fight for a Palestine and Kurdistan free from national oppression. We must fight against state imposition of religion and for the emancipation of women.

Finally, if there is one thing that the Syrian civil war and Palestinian conflict have shown, it is that the ruling elite in the Arab and Muslim world are corrupt traitors who will sacrifice the liberation of their people for short-term economic or political gain. Any struggle for democracy and freedom from imperialism will be waged against this social class, no matter how anti-imperialist they may sound on a given day. The future of the Middle East and Syria lies in the hands of its working people, not the elites. ***Unite against US imperialism and its lackeys—for a socialist federation of West Asia!*** ■

1. This wrong approach was that of the ICL in its coverage of the battle of Kobane and the entire Syrian civil war. The present article stands as a correction, in line with our broader reorientation. See "In Defense of Permanent Revolution", *Spartacist* no 68, September 2023.

Only anti-imperialism can unite the peoples of Syria

Scenes of jubilation erupted following the collapse of the hated Bashar al-Assad regime. While the dictator is now gone, many fear for what is to come next. The experiences of Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan show that the collapse of a hated regime does not automatically lead to progress. In the case of Syria, even the most optimistic of observers doubt that there is much truth to the democratic promises of the new government led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist militia originally affiliated with Al Qaeda. How to advance democratic and social conditions in the present situation? This is the crucial question facing the progressive and working-class forces in Syria today.

There are some who foolishly believe that the road to democratic progress lies through the US and EU providing sanctions relief and assistance. This is a dangerous delusion. Western imperialist powers are responsible for Syria and the entire region being engulfed in perpetual conflict. Their rhetoric about democracy and civil rights has never been anything more than a thin veneer for their real interest: to ensure that no state or coalition can stop the plundering of West Asia's resources.

Again and again, they have followed the same divide-and-conquer playbook, using the short-term interests of one religious or national faction to foster broader conflict and keep the region internally divided. This is no secret, and it should be obvious that social progress in the Middle East will only occur at the expense of the US and its Zionist attack dog. But reality is always more complicated than theory. The problem is that with a region so internally divided and poor, there is always a foe to be presented as a greater immediate danger than a distant foreign power.

This is what has made the Syrian conflict so intractable. Corrupt domestic cliques and foreign actors exploit the legitimate aspirations, fears and grievances of certain segments of the population to advance their own reactionary interests. The oppression of the Kurds by many states in the region is used by the US and Israel. The hatred for Assad and Western oppression is used by various Sunni Islamist forces. As for Assad, a key pillar of his regime was the legitimate fear of Alawites and other minorities that they would suffer retribution for the historic oppression of Sunni Muslims.

To unite the peoples of Syria and genuinely bring the region forward it is not enough to shout democratic and socialist platitudes into the wind. It is necessary to provide a programme which can untie the sectarian knots and regroup the genuinely revolutionary and progressive forces across religious and national lines. This will not be done through supporting whichever force is deemed to be the least reactionary at a given moment. Rather, what is crucial is to split the progressive impulses in each faction — Alawite, Sunni, Arab, Kurd, etc — from the reactionary forces exploiting these impulses to advance their own self-interest. This is not the easiest road, but it is the only one which offers a future for the peoples of Syria and the region.

Chris McGrath/Getty

13 December 2024: Crowd in Damascus celebrates fall of Assad dictatorship. What next for Syria?

The reactionary Baathist regime

In 2011, protests erupted throughout Syria, reflecting the democratic aspirations of a population which had lived under the dynastic dictatorship of the Assad family since 1970. The regime answered by unleashing a wave of brutal repression, gradually transforming a protest movement into a civil war. To understand this evolution, it is necessary to look at the basic characteristics of the Baathist regime, led by Bashar al-Assad.

The Syrian Baath Party rested on the pan-Arab project of uniting the various peoples in the region in a common national modernising project. At times the regime took a socialistic colouration, nationalising large swathes of industry. However, as in many Arab and Muslim countries, the social basis of the regime essentially rested on the military brass and narrow circles of the cosmopolitan business elite. While these layers in some way embody progressive aspirations towards secularism and modernity, their ultimate class interests are narrowly self-interested and stand in conflict with those of the impoverished mass of the population. In fact, the Assads' anti-imperialism was always very thin, entering the Lebanese civil war with tacit American-Israeli approval, joining the Gulf War in 1991 and collaborating with Bush's "War on Terror" in its early years.

Given that regimes like that of Assad hide behind secular and even socialist trappings to oppress their people, the opposition to them generally takes form along religious and sectarian lines rather than class ones. This was the case in the 2011 Arab Spring, where the popular revolts which started in urban centres against the dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere increasingly took the character of a religious struggle by the oppressed Sunni masses against the secular military elites. In Syria this dynamic was compounded by the fact that the Assad regime is narrowly based on the Alawite sect, representing only a small proportion of the Syrian population, which is over 70 per cent Sunni.

This meant that when protests erupted, Assad could only count on a very small base of support within society. To maintain his grip on power he could only use the fragments of the Syrian army whose loyalty was unquestionable. Thus, as discontent spread, government forces resorted to increasingly bloody tactics, which would spare manpower. The regime's troops heavily bombed urban areas, particularly targeting Sunni neighbourhoods. These actions, and the meddling of foreign powers, actively worked towards transforming the popular uprising into a sectarian civil war.

There is no denying that the US and its allies sought to undermine and ultimately topple the Syrian government. Not only did they impose crushing economic sanctions on the country, but they also armed, trained and financed various rebel groups. The defenders of the Assad regime point to these facts as arguments to support it as a lesser evil to the sectarian pro-imperialist forces that constituted the rebellion.

It was certainly necessary to oppose the aggression of Western imperialism against Syria. But the regime was not at any time waging a war of national defence against imperialism, and it was not in the interest of the working class to defend it. Despite the pan-Arab pretensions of the Baathist regime, it never constituted a true national government. The war it waged was not to unify the Arab people against foreign aggression. Rather, it was always a war to maintain the small clique of corrupt Assad loyalists resting on the Alawites. At bottom, it was the sectarian and dictatorial foundations of the regime, more than money, weapons or sanctions, which undermined and ultimately led to the collapse of a centralised Syrian government.

By oppressing the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, by denying basic democratic rights and by leeching off the wealth of the country, the Assad regime cleared the way for imperialists and regional powers to take advantage of the situation and push their own reactionary agendas. The regime was not to be defended, because it was not helping the defence of Syria against imperialist plunder but undermining it. As for the interventions by Russia and Iran in support of Assad, they were self-interested and reactionary, not anti-imperialist.

Many in Syria and internationally supported the Assad regime, not out of corrupt self-interest, but because they saw it as the only bulwark against religious reaction and the dismemberment of Syria. Many Alawites and other minorities supported the regime not out of love for Assad, but because they feared they would be the target of revenge if he lost his grip on power. To these layers, it was and remains necessary to show how national unification, the long-term safety of minorities, as well as social and democratic progress, could only happen in opposition to the Baathist regime. Others, including Hezbollah, militarily assisted the regime, fearing the ramifications of its collapse for the struggle against Israel. For these elements, it would need to be demonstrated that Assad's sectarian divisions weakened this regional struggle.

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